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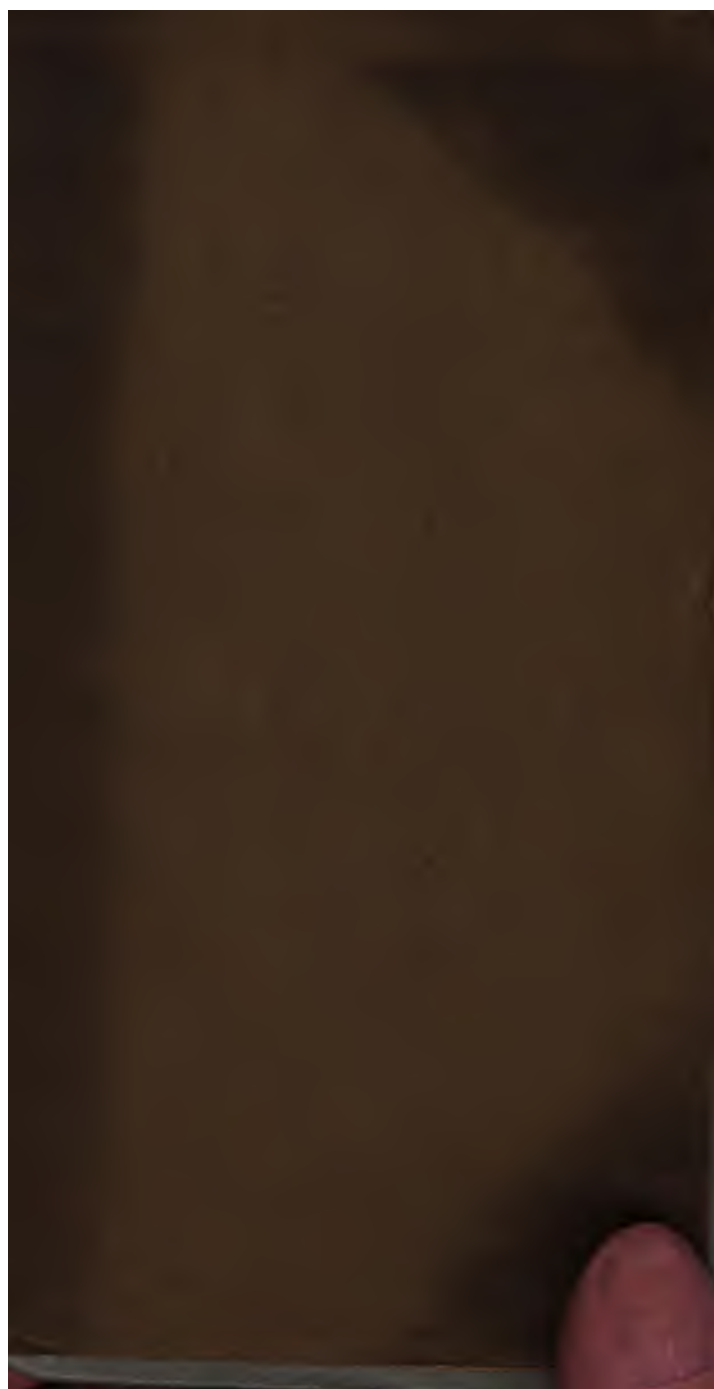
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LETTER

TO THE

OVERSEERS OF THE POOR,

OF THE

PARISH OF BEXLEY,

OCCASIONED BY A

RESOLUTION

PASSED IN VESTRY,

On THURSDAY, the 24th day of JANUARY, 1833.

BY

THOMAS STRONG.



—♦—

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A LETTER
TO THE
OVERSEERS OF THE POOR,

§c. §c.



GENTLEMEN,

THE late Resolution passed in Vestry,
“*To compel the Owners of small houses to pay
the Rates, which might be levied on such houses
instead of the occupier,*” induces me to take
the liberty of addressing you on the subject.

On that occasion, nearly all the owners
and occupiers of land within the parish were as-
sembled, and no wonder the said Resolution was
carried as a matter of course, by a large major-
ity, since all expected relief from the burden
they at present bear, by shifting a part of it from

their own shoulders to others less able to sustain it. At the first view, the Resolution looks fair enough, but I beg that you will calmly look at the causes which have originated such a measure and which I venture to foretel, will certainly end in the destruction of all cottage property;—while, at the same time, it will heap additional misery on those already in the gulph of poverty.

Gentlemen, you know too well how rapidly pauperism increases, and that all the pains which have been taken by your predecessors and yourselves, have been unable to check its growth. Now, the real cause of this state of things, is, first, the low wages paid to laborers generally, and to farm laborers particularly; and secondly, the scarcity of employment in proportion to the number of laborers requiring the same. Here then, gentlemen, you may at once find the source from whence flows the increase of pauperism and crime; and also the total want of respect shewn by the poor towards their employers.

It was stated by some in Vestry that they paid fourteen shillings per week, and by others twelve, leaving an average of thirteen shillings as the weekly wages of the labourer, and the prevailing opinion was, that this was a maximum. (Leaving, however, the gentlemen present, to

shew how the poor man at the lowest rate of wages would be benefited, by his fellow having higher,) I would beg them to look at facts.— Does the laborer *actually* receive thirteen shillings per week ? Is he paid for bad weather,— is he paid during sickness,—and does he receive such wages when his employment ceases ? Certainly not *—Then how fallacious is the statement

* At **BROMLEY**, the following effects have arisen from passing a similar Resolution ;—some landlords have reduced the greater part of their cottages below six pounds per annum, and individually sustained a very considerable loss of income, while the parish is utterly incapable of extracting one shilling of rate, excepting in those cases where individuals are paid by distant parishes, through the hands of the Overseers. And, to shew how cruelly this system works, it may be sufficient to state that one of the sufferers is a poor widow, left with five or six children under ten years of age, who has had the whole amount of the rate stopped out of her paltry allowance of five shillings per week!!!—Other landlords have sought to screen themselves from its effects, by (nominally) letting their cottages quarterly, while at the same time, they take such portions of their rents as they can get, and carry it to account, giving a receipt when it amounts to a quarterly payment.—The consequence is, that the poor tenant is perpetually harrassed by summonses from the tax collector, and seizures by the landlord's broker, and to add to his misery, the money which should be spent in procuring food and clothes for himself and family is squandered in law expences.—Other cottage holders in the same parish fancying themselves a little more cunning than their

that the laborers receive thirteen shillings per week. Why if you really make proper and fair deductions, you will find that nine shillings is about the actual average they receive. And who makes up the deficiency to enable the poor to live at all ? why the bakers and shopkeepers, as the books of these persons will prove to the most sceptical. The relief, or a great part thereof, which the poor out of the poor-house occasionally receive, is paid in costs to the Court of Requests, and the clerks of such Court, it is asserted, receive annually in costs from one thousand to twelve hundred pounds, the greatest part of which must come out of the poor-rates.

neighbours ; have admitted tenants with the alternative of paying parish rates themselves, or an advanced rent of three pence per week ; of course the tenant invariably undertakes to pay the rate, but in most instances 'tis found that as soon as he can possibly get a little in the landlord's debt he quits, leaving, both rent and taxes to be recovered in the best way they can.—It may form an amusing incident in the history of the working of the Cottage Assessment system, and shew that the proprietor of some cottages, let for above six pounds per annum not one hundred miles from Bexley, directed his collector of rents, to take what sums he could get, but to give only quarterly receipts, and then maintained they were not liable to the rates, while in another parish, he maintained all others similarly circumstanced were subject to the assessment and actually sued for the amount.

I heard one, (a reverend clergyman) say, that he had lately erected some cottages from humane motives ; it might be so, but I think his humanity is of that species which has brought us into the abyss of calamity, for in this instance, I think I can shew it centres in about ten per cent ! It has been said, that, on the average, each poor family consists of five persons, and can it be in the opinion of their wealthy brethren, the wages now paid them are quite sufficient !!!

Gentlemen, you well know, that it has been proved over and over again, that, to maintain five persons in the poor-house for one week will cost seventeen shillings and sixpence, exclusive of rent and clothing, and surely no one will say that the poor in the house are fed on *dainties* ! I will endeavour in the subjoined scale to shew the actual state of destitution to which the poor are driven :

To maintain five persons one week will require

Seven quartern loaves, at 9d.	5s	3d.
Coals	0	10
Tea and Sugar	1	0
Salt and Pepper	0	1
Soap	0	4
4lb. of Bacon for five persons for seven days	2	0
Potatoes	0	9

Candles	0	2
Rent, say	2	6
Total	<u>12</u>	<u>11</u>

I think no one will say, I have given a sufficient allowance. I have not reckoned for beer, for butter, or for clothing ! and there are many little things which must be purchased with money. Now, this family, taking the whole year through, not being in the receipt of more than nine shillings (and I sincerely believe not so much,) it is quite out of their power to pay their rent.—Sickness often visits them and then how are they supported ? A poor laborer works hard on a comfortless day, with scarcely any food but bread ; his wife and children have hot water and sugar, with bread and potatoes for dinner ;— at night tired and hungry he comes home, perhaps dripping wet, finds scarcely a spark of fire, his children crying,—his wife miserable;—the scene is too bad for him to view—and who would view it that could flee from it.—What follows ; he first goes to some hedge for firing—and then to the ale-house, where *a good fire is among its comforts*, and there he endeavours to forget his home, himself, and his family !!!

Oh ! once happy England ! is not this description of thy present state too true ! does not thy pea-

sant curse the hour in which he was born? Is not a goal a better place than his home? does it not lose all its terrors by a comparison? think Gentlemen, one moment on such a scene, and its attendant horrors! Your late Resolution will, if any thing is necessary complete the climax. Landlords of small cottages if compelled to pay the poor-rates on such property will no longer hesitate to enforce the payment of their rents, and when the poor creatures are stripped of their bed and home, what will you then do? Enlarge your poor-house, encrease your rates to a frightful amount, and when too late, those so eager to tax the property of others, will be the first to exclaim "who would have thought it!"

Why, these Solons always see with a microscopic eye, and continue their legislations, till all law is lost in civil commotion.*

First, they narrow employment, and then disallow fair remuneration for labour;—they take off the duty from beer—when the poor can no

* A celebrated individual has said "We assemble Parliaments and Councils to have the benefit of their collected wisdom, but we necessarily have at the same time the inconvenience of the collected passions, prejudices, and private interest. By the help of these, artful men overpower their wisdom and dupe its possessors, and if we may judge by the acts, &c. "an assembly of great men is the greatest fool on earth."

longer purchase it;—they open ale-houses without number to encourage the idle and corrupt the morals of youth;—they encourage schools, teach religion, morality and virtue, at the same time opening the temple of vice almost under the same roof, and then stand astonished to see that all their admonitions are thrown away, and that crime increases ! Why, it is notorious to all who will take the trouble to look into it, that a number of those new ale-houses are frequented by the youth of both sexes, and all irregularity of conduct is winked at, whilst throughout the land they have been proved to be the convenient receptacle for the assassin, the burglar, and the incendiary.

Gentlemen, you will, I hope, pardon me for digressing from the subject of the Resolution, for the many parts blended into one system require some illustration. I think Gentlemen the paramount duty of man, is to endeavour by all the means which providence has placed at his disposal, to make his fellow creatures happy, and I am sure, was this principle put in practice, only to a very limited extent, the burden of the poor-rates would be comparatively insignificant.

That there are dissolute persons in every grade of society, is an incontrovertible fact, and therefore laws are necessary, and the due enforce-

ment of salutary law acts for the welfare of all ; but, first by example teach the poor, that the laws operate for their benefit, and that they are not exclusively for the rich.

Would the gentlemen who are the proprietors of the soil in the parish of Bexley, (I mean the residents) but cast their eyes around their domains, I believe they might see, where a number of laborers could be employed. Ponds might be cleansed,—banks repaired,—roads made,—trees planted,—others grubbed,—lands now worthless improved, and labour found for every poor man in the parish. Pay them wages sufficient for their comfortable subsistence, and this would in a great measure prevent crime, ease the county rate, and bestow blessings incalculable. Only think what security it would give to property ! Then let the whole country petition for the repeal of the Malt tax, that the gentleman, the farmer, and the tradesman, might be enabled to give their laborers, a beverage to make their tasks easy, and also to prevent the necessity of those disgusting Beer-Houses.

I think Gentlemen, the evils which afflict society might easily be removed, only by a liberality dispensed in the true spirit of christianity. We are told that the rich man came and said “Lord what shall I do to be saved?” and the

answer was "Sell all thou hast and give unto "the poor." Here then from the mouth of God himself, we are told to dispense with our riches amongst those poorer than ourselves; the subject is one upon which many a volume might be written, but it is said "A word to the wise" is sufficient.

Now then Gentlemen, I think, I have shewn that the late Resolution will not add one shilling towards the poor rate, but be the very means of encreasing it, to an alarming degree, and, I think I have also shewn how easy the condition of the poor might be bettered, and the relations of society placed on a better footing than at present, and would it not be a proud thing for Bexley, to be the first parish in the kingdom to set so glorious an example? I heard one of our worthy County Representatives say in an address to the electors "I have witnessed the growing "misery of the poor for the last thirty years, and "did I not hope that something would be done "to better their condition, I should pray the "Almighty to terminate my existence!"

Here then was an admission that the statement I have before given is not exaggerated. No Gentlemen, nor is its colouring sufficient.—I once recollect reading, that the celebrated Burke lamented that the age of chivalry was gone!

Now I am sure that there are many, very many, who lament that the days of ignorance are gone, but these laments will not bring back either that chivalry or that ignorance. But, I do hope some noble minds will be inspired with a new species of chivalry, that of being foremost in alleviating the sorrows which afflict their fellow men. Deeds of valour are admired, transmitted to posterity, inscribed on marble, in paintings, and the page of history but how much more renowned will be the deeds of him, who by his example in the paths of virtue, shall excite in the minds of the wealthy, an ambition to imitate him, and thus be the means of raising the drooping spirits of the nation by the banishment of discord, and fixing the security of property on its true and surest basis, *the comfort and happiness of our poorer brethren.*

Before I conclude, I cannot keep from alluding to a notorious fact;—almost every farmer complains of the *times*, that his losses as a cultivator are certain—yet those persons almost to a man, endeavour to extend their sphere, grasping at farm after farm, and complaining all the while. Here then is one grand cause of the scarcity of labour, by the monopoly of the soil. Does a man, employ twice as many labourers in the cultivation of two hundred acres as he would do in the cultivation of one hundred?—and so you might go

onto an almost unlimited extent, in occupation. It is the common argument, that a large quantity of land may be managed with trifling additional expence (that is, they do not want so many labourers in proportion,) which holds out the inducement to increase the quantity;—that if we see a man occupying a very small proportion of land, he cannot do all the labour himself, and that he pays a third more than his neighbour with twice his quantity. This however is only stating that which is as evident as the sun at noon day, and therefore Gentlemen,

I beg to remain,

Your obedient Servant,

THOMAS STRONG.

Welling, February 2nd, 1833.



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